

### **Kit-Houses in Eugene, Oregon?**

With a booming population came increased interest in the residential housing industry. In response to a greater need for more housing many companies began to expand or aim their business plans towards the residential housing market. With the passage of the 'Rural Free Delivery Act' in 1896, many people previously isolated in their rural communities now became new customers for a rapidly expanding mail-order catalog industry.<sup>1</sup> This eventually led to the proliferation of what we now refer to as "mail-order kit houses" or "catalog houses".

"Kit houses" were complete houses pre-cut in a factory and then shipped by railroad to the customer's town. Pre-cut lumber, windows, tar paper, hardware, even nails and paint, arrived numbered and labeled ready for assembly. The materials for these houses were prepared in factories where greater efficiency was possible and were then sold directly to the customer through mail order catalogs. Many companies claimed it would save the buyer up to 30% compared with traditional house construction.<sup>2</sup>

Because of the substantial savings over traditional building methods, mail-order housing's popularity increased dramatically leading to several national kit-house companies and numerous regional companies. National companies included: Aladdin Homes, Gordon Van-Tine, Harris Brothers, Lewis Homes, Montgomery Wards (Wardway Homes), Sears Roebuck, and Sterling Homes. Aladdin Company, located in Bay City, Michigan, offered the first pre-cut kit house in 1906. Soon thereafter, Sears Roebuck and Company entered the market to become one of the largest and most well known providers of kit houses. These companies offered houses in many different styles, ranging from small bungalows to large mansions which were distributed nationwide. According to the book, *Houses by Mail*, "100,000 kit houses were built in the United States between 1908 and 1940."

In the Eugene area, this phenomenon occurred primarily in the 1920s. As large national companies began to expand, they eventually located manufacturing plants in the Pacific Northwest where there was an abundance of Douglas Fir forest to be milled into quality

kit-house lumber. Gordon-Van Tine (who also manufactured many houses for Montgomery Wards) established a manufacturing facility in Chehalis, Washington<sup>3</sup>; while Aladdin Company located a facility in Oregon. In addition, a regional company called Pacific Homes located its business in Los Angeles, California. With several manufacturing plants on the west coast, shipping costs became much more affordable for Oregonians who desired mail-order houses. In Eugene, Oregon the River Road area is of special interest. Southern Pacific Railroad consolidated its freight division to the Eugene railyard in 1926, so the River Road area became a very easy place to receive kit-house shipments due to its close proximity to the railroad yard. Regional manufacturing plants combined with the convenient location of the railyard indicate that mail-order kit houses may be more common in the River Road area than previously thought.

As evidence of such probabilities, Eugene's first official kit house was identified on Sunnyside Drive in the River Road area in July of 2005. The owners of this inconspicuous c.1930 house discovered their home's unique mail-order history during a remodeling project. They found stampings on the beams indicating part numbers used for assembly as well as a Montgomery Ward logo. It appears that this kit-house is the Cabot A or B model also known as Model #633. Research has revealed that this house was most likely manufactured in Gordon Van-Tine's Chehalis, Washington facility, and then sold under the Montgomery Ward brand name.



Gordon Van-Tine, model #633 kit-house on Sunnyside Drive.

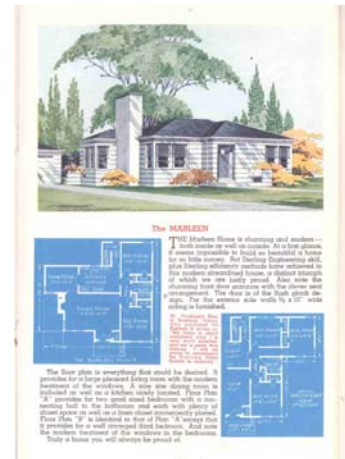


Catalog illustration advertising a similar Gordon Van-Tine kit-house.

In August of 2005, City of Eugene staff identified a second kit-house, also on Sunnyside Drive, only ten houses away from the previously identified kit-house. This house was purchased from Sterling Homes, located in Bay City, Michigan, which was a division of International Mill and Timber. Because shipping costs would have been substantial to Eugene, Oregon it is likely that Sterling Homes contracted the framing work to a local lumber mill. Smaller building supplies such as windows, doors, cabinets, and hardware would still have been shipped from the Bay City, Michigan facility. This kit-house is a post-war model from 1945 known as the “Marleen”. We suspect the original owners also purchased a kit-garage along with the house for an additional cost. (Adding a garage was a common marketing tool to increase sales.) While kit-house sales began to decline during the 1940’s and 1950’s, this house and garage remain as an excellent example of a late mail-order project.



Sterling “Marleen” model on Sunnyside Drive.



Catalog Illustration for  
Sterling “Marleen” model.

While you may have lived in your house for many years, it is very possible that you too may be living in a kit house without even knowing it. Imagine finding out that you have been living in a piece of America’s architectural history! To determine if your house is a kit house refer to the List of Identification Methods.

<sup>1</sup> Schweitzer, Robert and Michael W. R. Davis. America's Favorite Homes – Mail Order Catalogs as a Guide to Popular Early 20th Century Houses. 62

<sup>2</sup> Hunter, Rebecca. Mail Order House Research. 2005

<sup>3</sup> Gordon Van-Tine Co. 117 House Designs of the Twenties.

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